



## CHAPTER SIX

### COLONIALISM AS A SYSTEM FOR UNDERDEVELOPING AFRICA

*The black man certainly has to pay dear for carrying the white man's burden.*

George Padmore,  
(West Indian) Pan-Africanist, 1936.

*In the colonial society, education is such that it serves the colonialist.. In a regime of slavery, education was but one institution for forming slaves.*

Statement of FRELIMO (Mozambique Liberation Front)  
Department of Education and Culture 1968.

## 6.1 The Supposed Benefits of Colonialism to Africa

### (a) Socio-Economic Services

Faced with the evidence of European exploitation of Africa, many bourgeois writers would concede at least partially that colonialism was a system which functioned well in the interests of the metropolises. However, they would then urge that another issue to be resolved is how much Europeans did for Africans, and that it is necessary to draw up a 'balance sheet of colonialism'. On that balance sheet, they place both the 'credits' and the 'debits', and quite often conclude that the good outweighed the bad. That particular conclusion can quite easily be challenged, but attention should also be drawn to the fact that the process of reasoning, is itself misleading. The reasoning has some sentimental persuasiveness. It appeals to the common sentiment that 'after all there must be two sides to a thing'. The argument suggests that, on the one hand, there was exploitation and oppression, but, on the

other hand, colonial governments did much for the benefit of Africans and they developed Africa. It is our contention that this is completely false. Colonialism had only one hand -- it was a one-armed bandit.

What did colonial governments do in the interest of Africans? Supposedly, they built railroads, schools, hospitals and the like. The sum total of these services was amazingly small.

For the first three decades of colonialism, hardly anything was done that could remotely be termed a service to the African people. It was in fact only after the last war that social services were built as a matter of policy. How little they amounted to does not really need illustrating. After all, the statistics which show that Africa today is underdeveloped are the statistics representing the state of affairs at the end of colonialism. For that matter, the figures at the end of the first decade of African independence in spheres such as health, housing and education are often several times higher than the figures inherited by the newly independent governments. It would be an act of the most brazen fraud to weigh the paltry social amenities provided during the colonial epoch against the exploitation, and to arrive at the conclusion that the good outweighed the bad.

Capitalism did bring social services to European workers -- firstly, as a by-product of providing such services for the bourgeoisie and the middle class, and later as a deliberate act of policy. Nothing remotely comparable occurred in Africa. In 1934, long before the coming of the welfare state to Britain, expenditure for social services in the British Isles amounted to £6 15s per person. In Ghana, the figure was 7/4d per person, and that was high by colonial standards. In Nigeria and Nyasaland, it was less than 1/9d per head. None of the other colonising powers were doing any better, and some much worse.

The Portuguese stand out because they boasted the most and did the least. Portugal boasted that Angola, Guinea and Mozambique have been their possessions for 500 years, during which time a 'civilizing mission' has been going on. At the end of 500 years of shouldering the white man's burden of civilising 'African natives', the Portuguese had not managed to train a single African doctor in Mozambique, and the life expectancy in Eastern Angola was less than 30 years. As for Guinea-Bissau, some insight into the situation there is provided by the admission of the Portuguese themselves that Guinea-Bissau was more neglected than Angola and Mozambique!

Furthermore, the limited social services within Africa during colonial times were distributed in a manner that reflected the pattern of domination and exploitation. First of all, white settlers and expatriates wanted the standards of the bourgeoisie

or professional classes of the metropolises. They were all the more determined to have luxuries in Africa, because so many of them came from poverty in Europe and could not expect good services in their own homelands. In colonies like Algeria, Kenya and South Africa, it is well known that whites created an infrastructure to afford themselves leisured and enjoyable lives. It means, therefore, that the total amenities provided in any of those colonies is no guide to what Africans got out of colonialism.

In Algeria, the figure for infant mortality was 39 per 1,000 live births among white settlers; but it jumped to 170 per 1,000 live births in the case of Algerians living in the towns. In practical terms, that meant that the medical, maternity and sanitation services were all geared towards the well-being of the settlers. Similarly, in South Africa, all social statistics have to be broken down into at least two groups -- white and black -- if they are to be interpreted correctly. In British East Africa there were three groups: firstly, the Europeans who got the most, then the Indians who took most of what was left, and thirdly the Africans, who came last in their own country.

In predominantly black countries, it was also true that the bulk of the social services went to whites. The southern part of Nigeria was one of the colonial areas that was supposed to have received the most from a benevolent 'mother country'. Ibadan, one of the most heavily populated cities in Africa, had only about 50 Europeans before the last war. For those chosen few, the British colonial government maintained a segregated hospital service of 11 beds in well-furnished surroundings. There were 34 beds for the half-a-million blacks. The situation was repeated in other areas, so that altogether the 4,000 Europeans in the country in the 1930s had 12 modern hospitals, while the African population of at least 40 million had 52 hospitals.

The viciousness of the colonial system with respect to the provision of social services was most dramatically brought out in the case of economic activities which made huge profits, and notably in the mining industry. Mining takes serious toll of the health of workers, and it was only recently in the metropolises that miners have had access to the kind of medical and insurance services which could safeguard their lives and health. In colonial Africa, the exploitation of miners was entirely without responsibility. In 1930, scurvy and other epidemics broke out in the Lupa goldfields of Tanganyika. Hundreds of workers died. One should not wonder that they had no facilities which would have saved some lives, because in the first place they were not being paid enough to eat properly.

South Africa's large working class African population was in a sad state. The Tuberculosis Commission of 1912 reported that in the shanty towns

*Scarcely a single family exists in which at least one member is not suffering or dying from tuberculosis. Hospital services are so inadequate that incurable tuberculosis and other cases are simply sent home to die and spread the infection. In some areas, a single doctor has to attend to the needs of 40,000 people. The natives must pay for medical treatment. There is no provision for pauper patients. About 65% of the native children die before reaching two years.*

That was as early as 1912, when the basis of the South African gold and diamond empire was already laid. Since then, the shanty towns increased, the slum conditions grew worse, and the government committed itself to pursuing the odious policy of apartheid, which meant separation of the races so as better to exploit the African people.

Many Africans trekked to towns, because (bad as they were) they offered a little more than the countryside. Modern sanitation, electricity, piped water, paved roads, medical services and schools were as foreign at the end of the colonial period as they were in the beginning -- as far as most of rural Africa was concerned. Yet, it was the countryside that grew the cash-crops and provided the labour that kept the system going. The peasants there knew very little of the supposed 'credits' on the colonial balance sheet.

---

The entire book can be downloaded in PDF format [by clicking here](#) (1069 KB).

---



**Course: Development, Rural and Urban**

**13072, Rodney, Colonialism, System for Underdeveloping Africa, 1973**

1427 words (the entire chapter is 34211 words)